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THEA 2110 – Voices of Diversity

Farley Richmond

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BFE Performance Critique

The production of BFE did an excellent job following the plot and alternating from scene to scene. The actors carried the scene transitions well and made the changes easy to follow and believable. The scene changes are something that I had difficulty organizing in reading the play myself, so it was helpful to visualize the actions being “walked through” in the same order. The use of sound also emphasized scene transitions, and was helpful with Lefty and Evvie’s interactions at the mall, and with Isabel “seducing” the pizza Delivery Guy. The main idea of “beauty” and of Panny’s ultimate fate seemed to be foreshadowed with the opening scene. Panny “wakes up” on a surgery table surrounded by doctors with lights, and she gets up to give the introduction to the audience. I thought that was a great way of alluding to Panny’s decision to get surgery in the end without beginning in media res. This was a way of following the “lights up” entrance that I did not consider, and I think it added to the mystery of Panny’s fate to the audience. Panny’s monologue says that what happened to her “depends on how you look at it” and her actions with the flashlight were interesting and made the audience more curious as to what she would eventually go through.

One of the best combinations of the Seeny-Stovall BFE was the acting, notably from Isabel’s character. In the book, I interpreted Isabel to be the woman who was beautiful and popular as a teenager, then lost her childhood (with a teenage pregnancy) but was still in the mindset of being obsessed with what men thought about her. I did not find her sympathetic for most of the play, except when the Delivery Guy ends up leaving, and read her part as less “funny” and just bitter. However, seeing Isabel acted out as a humorous character made her significantly more sympathetic. Isabel did continue to try and see her own value in what men *thought of her*, which parallels Panny’s desire to be what society wants her to be. She is extremely theatrical in how she tries to present herself, but underneath she is still the scared teenager that she was when she had Panny. Isabel incidentally passes this insecurity on to her daughter and avoids the responsibility of behaving like a mother. I do not think I would not have gotten this emotional parallel without seeing Isabel acted out rather than just written on the page. One of the best moments was the “How to Be a Fascinating Woman” dialogue and her frustration with Lefty when he leaves and she screams after him. Isabel embodied one of the ideas I pointed out about BFE’s portrayal of family. Bitterness and regret, despite how much you may “love” your family, is a major part of the characters’ lives. Both performers who portrayed Lefty and Evvie’s relationship also added sincerity to the written dialogue, and actually seeing their breakup did make me feel more emotional for these characters. I appreciated the development that Lefty’s actor brought to the performance, and it mirrored Lefty’s growing confidence to be his own person and “life for himself”. I also think that Evvie’s actress balanced their relationship ending very well. The audience could have easily been angry with Evvie for refusing to re-enter the role of a mother, but she was just as complex as Lefty was in where he was coming from. He was not Panny’s biological father but had taken that role in her life, and he could not forgive himself for abandoning her.

I think that the role of Panny, though it is her “story”, was a bit more difficult to see as the main storyline. I found myself being more interested in the experiences of Isabel and Lefty in the actual performance than what happened to Panny. My own reading may be to blame for this. I think Lefty and Isabel were not at all how I assumed they would be portrayed as, so I was eager to see what would happen to their plots. Panny was played how I had read her to be, and it seemed as if I was re-watching something I already knew the ending to. It was still enjoyable and the performance was good, but was not as drawn to Panny. Panny is more difficult to play because she isn’t necessarily an extreme caricature. Isabel is very dramatic and Lefty is very lovable, but Panny is a neutral character that finds herself as the play progresses. BFE, in this way, reminds me of Real Women Have Curves. The main characters tell the story, and do have major dramatic scenes, but sometimes the other characters catch my interest a bit more.

The interpretation of Hae-Yoon’s character was another of my favorite parts. I appreciated that she was an overhanging voice in the upper seats that everyone turned to while she read her letters. I assumed that it would be done with just a voiceover – not with the actor visible to the audience until she steps down and interrupts Panny’s aside when she “escapes” from The Man. The actress’ voice projection was excellent and made the character more concrete than I had felt in the written play. The only time Hae-Yoon seemed real to me was during the interruption, but the performance made her more than a disembodied stereotype. When Hae-Yoon descends from the back of the audience and walks up to Panny and declares she is lying was one of my favorite parts, and the confrontation makes the audience feel for Panny even more.

I wish that more funding had been given in order to supply a few concrete set areas. In the scene with Panny and Hugo’s conversation “laying on the bed”, it was hard to tell the boundaries of where they were. If I had not read the play, I would probably have been confused – even though they were carrying telephones around with them. I also would have moved the “bed” to the center stage and maybe have done a center division rather than having them on one side of the stage. The scene is meant to blur the boundaries between them physically seeing and knowing each other versus each imaging what the other is like, but I think that a few more physical items needed to be available in order to make that clear to the audience. The black boxes and small set were useful in the quick changes, and merely required that the audience suspend reality enough to follow the actions. There was not too much added to the play from the setting for me, and it was one of the things that stayed with me the least. The costuming also felt like a background aspect to me. The play takes place in the 1990s, and so small choices clued you in – Panny’s hair, Hugo’s clothing, and the use of cord telephones – but nothing else was overtly evident. This choice seems correct to me, partly because I also forgot that it was in the 90’s other than the plot device of “meeting someone you met on the phone”. This doesn’t seem like a play that needs extravagant decoration, but can just be carried by a few good performances and be enjoyable.

I think that the costuming and effects were great in the more visceral parts, including the end with Panny crying through her bandages and being left bleeding. The decision to have all three characters left with only each other in front of the television, followed by the slow fading to black, made the ending even more sad and a bit uncomfortable to watch. Panny’s monologue, which had the effect of having UGLY carved into her stomach, was done specifically to where it looked almost healed rather than bloody (like the bandages). Seeing it healed, I think, makes the audience even more uneasy because it does show that she lived with this emblazoned on her. It is even more sad when Panny looks down and refuses to look towards the audience, and the actress projected a sense of shame and self-blame for what happened. Julia Cho’s portrayal of assault is very frustrating because of how Panny resigns herself. Other plays that we have covered sometimes end up with a twisted type of justice for assault victims, similar to Trifles, but Cho’s choice is unforgiving and brutal. Panny is not victorious or gets any type of justice, she just simply has to deal with the perceptions that every person around puts onto her.

Overall, I think that I gained more from seeing BFE performed than I got from just reading it. Julia Cho’s balance between humor and uncomfortable topics like assault, murder, and rape come across more evenly in the actual performance. The play seems more well-rounded and less of an attempt at overt social commentary. This BFE interpretation is both entertaining *and* meaningful. I wish that we could see more stage interpretations of plays that we read, because after seeing this comparison I do think I may have missed some of the nuances that come with a physical performance. I think that the cast carried this play to the fullest, and I was impressed with the quality of characterization and personality that each brought.